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ABSTRACT

This report examines some myths and stereotypes in the light of factual information about cultural and learning characteristics of minority group children in urban school settings. Cited among the most prevalent myths are that the academic failure of urban children results from genetically determined intellectual inferiority, and that the failures of urban school children may be attributed to pathological social influences. Also examined are minority group family characteristics, and parent and teacher responsibilities and attitudes which are said to influence educational objectives and affect the actual outcomes of education in the urban school. Role clarification is identified as a critical factor in the achievement of success. It is further suggested that evaluation and change are needed in the following problem areas: (1) the biases of standardized tests; (2) the irrelevancy of textbooks; (3) the incompetence of school administrators; and (4) the inadequacy of present systems intended to evaluate the teaching process. (JCD)

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# URBAN CHILD ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS: MYTHS AND REALITIES

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Educators have often worked on the assumption that "programs" hold the key to successful educational development of urban children. My experiences indicate, however, that other variables influence the levels of achievement. These variables are directly related to the myths about urban children which are held by educators and running rampant throughout the fibers of urban schools. My position in this paper is that unless educators are fundamentally sound in terms of their understanding of the cultural orientation of the Black community and unless they are able to view the life style of Black people from a realistic rather than a mythological perspective, programs will continue the history of failure by which they have been characterized through the last two decades.

To this end, I suggest that there are some myths about life in the inner city which must be corrected if programs and activities introduced into the inner city schools are to have a positive impact on the educational development of the urban children.

## MYTHS: GENETIC INTELLECTUAL INFERIORITY AND SOCIAL PATHOLOGY IN LIFE STYLES

The myths which are perhaps the most prevalent among educators in urban areas are (1) the failures of urban children result from some genetic intellectual inferiority of the youngsters; and/or (2) the failures of urban children are attributable to some social pathology existing in the environment in which inner city youngsters live. Both of these myths grow out of the efforts of educators to avoid shouldering the responsibility for the

failures of children in urban schools. Far too many educators apparently have the mythological belief that inner city youngsters lack the native intellectual ability to function effectively in school. This conclusion is based on observations of what educators actually do in the inner city school rather than on what they say they do. As Susan Jacoby indicates:

> ...one of the gravest problems of all faced by school systems with large concentrations of inner city students...is a deeply ingrained belief...that such children have less ability to learn than other children...The attitude that large numbers of children are uneducable gives teachers an easy out if they work where most of their students score...below the norms on standardized tests.[1]

Although a large percentage of educators in inner city schools believe the myth that the students are intellectually inferior to other students, a far larger number ascribe the failures of education in these situations to some kind of social pathology existing in the life style of their students and their parents. These educators function on the assumption that there is something pathologically wrong with the children's environment and, ultimately, with their culture. Further, they tend to believe that the experiences evolving from a different life style are innately bad and negative.

This belief is evident in the terms used to describe youngsters from oppressed situations, "Culturally deprived," "Culturally disadvantaged," etc. In many instances, educators are beginning to demonstrate some perception in this area for such terms are being replaced by others; however, the attitudinal and behavioral changes which must accompany the change in terminology have not developed. The approaches which educators continue to use in inner city schools are both culturally arrogant and biased.

The reality is that the life styles of various ethnic groups result in the development of various cultural strengths which are reflected in variables

that are traditionally associated with academic achievement. Jews, for example, score higher in relation to the general population in verbal ability than they do in space conceptualization. For Chinese children, the relative strengths and weaknesses in verbal ability and space conceptualization are reversed. Similarly Blacks seem to perform somewhat better in arithmetic skills and space conceptualization than they do in verbal tests; for Puerto Ricans the pattern is almost the reverse. Although middle-class children score higher in all categories, the relative ethnic differences are not entirely eliminated. To Susan Stodolsky and Gerald Lesser, these findings suggest new distinctions, difinitions, and a new course of action. To the concept of equality of educational opportunity they want to add what they consider an equally important objective of diversification, of trading on the strengths of different ethnic groups to help them develop those strengths to the maximum. They conclude:

> Beyond deploying all necessary resources to achieve minimal equality in essential goals, further development of students may well be diverse. Following our principle of matching instruction and ability, we incidentally may enhance the initial strengths which each group possesses.[2]

They do not suggest producing a Black or Puerto Rican curriculum; what they do propose is tailoring the mode and techniques of instruction to the strengths of the particular children. The school must take the life styles of the various ethnic groups in the inner city seriously as a condition and a pattern of experience--not just as a contemptible and humiliating set of circumstances from which the children should be anxious to escape. It must accept their language, their dress, and their values as a point of departure for disciplined exploration, to be understood, not as a trick for enticing them into the white middle-class culture, but as a way of helping them to

explore the meaning of their own lives. This is the way to nurture potentialities from whatever ethnic group or social class.

MYTH: BLACK FAMILIES ARE UNSTABLE AND WEAK

Most discussions of Black families in the literature tend to focus on indicators of instability, disintegration, weakness or pathology. Whereas many social scientists portray inner city Black family life as disorganized, pathological and disintegrating, others assert that a self perpetuating "culture of poverty" exists among Blacks.

Unfortunately, this traditional focus has created the false impression, the myth, that instability and pathology are characteristic of most Black families. There is a tendency to forget that deviance, by definition, refers to departures from the norm. Thus, in general, deviance among Blacks is as "abnormal" as it is among whites. The great majority of Black families, for example, are not characterized by criminality, delinquency, drug addiction or desertion.

This preoccupation with pathology in most research on Black families has obscured some fruitful avenues of investigation. Many scholars in this field have failed to realize that a determination of "why most people conform" can help in understanding "why the few deviate." It is my contention that examining the strengths of Black families can contribute at least as much toward understanding and ameliorating the failures of children in educational institutions as examining their weaknesses.

The departure from the "pathological" approach to Black family life is an attempt to adopt an earlier perspective evident in the works of DuBois, Johnson, Drake, and Clayton, which has been reasserted by Billingsley, Herzog, Lewis and Valentine.[3]

Educators must not view the Black family as a casual nexus in a tangle of pathology which feeds on itself. Rather, the Black family must be viewed in a theoretical perspective as a subsystem of the larger society. It is, in my view, an absorbing, adaptive and amazingly resilient mechanism for the socialization of its children and the civilization of its society.

Ladner's well-documented work, Tomorrow's Tommorow clearly incorporates this perspective. Its primary focus is on the strengths and resources of young Black women growing up in urban ghettos.[4]

Because of the subjectivity of the term, it is not easy to specify what is meant by a "family strength." A strength, according to one set of criteria, could easily be interpreted as a weakness, according to another set of criteria--and vice-versa. For example, most observers would probably agree that a strong bond of affection between members of a family is usually an asset. But if this affection is manifested in incestuous relationships among family members, such a bond would generally be characterized as a "pathological" liability.

The classic analyses of the family as a social system by Parsons yield several helpful dimensions of family strengths. One of these dimensions, the ability to provide the necessary functions (both expressive and instrumental) to members and non-members, is basic to a viable family unit.[5] We, therefore, operationally define as family strengths those traits which facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demands made upon it by systems outside the family unit. They are necessary for the survival and maintenance of effective family networks.

Based upon a survey of what families perceive to be their strengths, Otto identified several family strengths in his essay, "What is a Strong Family?" Those traits listed by Otto that are most relevant to this discussion are: (1) The ability to provide for the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of a family;

(2) A concern for family unity, loyalty and inter-family cooperation;

(3) An ability to establish and maintain growth-producing relationships within and without the family;

(4) An ability for self-help and the ability to accept help when appropriate; and

(5) An ability to perform family roles flexibly.[6]

Examination of the literature of Black families reveals that the following characteristics have been functional for their survival, development and stability:

(1) Strong kinship bonds

(2) Strong work orientation

(3) Adaptability of family roles

(4) Strong achievement orientation

(5) Strong religious orientation

(6) Structured independence

(7) Group cooperation

(8) Ingenuity (skillful manipulation of circumstances)

(9) Internal fortitude (regulation of life's existence with few of the outer signs of worth and value as defined by the society in which one exists)

(10) Divergent thinking

Although these traits can be found among white families, they are manifested quite differently in the lives of Black families because of the unique history of racial oppression experienced by Blacks in America. In fact, the particular forms that these characteristics take among Black families should be viewed as adaptations necessary for survival and advancement in a hostile environment.

Teachers in the inner city must accept the fact that the failures of

many inner city children are actually due to their teachers acceptance of the myth that the Black family is characterized by instability, weaknesses and pathology. Because educators in urban areas embrace this myth, they are unable to be responsive to the cultural strengths of Black youngsters as they evolve from the unique life styles of Black families in urban areas. If we intend to be sucessful in urban schools, teachers must go through cognitive and affective learning processes which will enable them to identify the cultural strengths in the lifestyles of their students so that they can develop programs and utilize approaches which build on the strengths of urban children and reflect their cultural orientation.

MYTH: BASIC PURPOSE OF EDUCATION IS TO PREPARE CHILDREN FOR LIFE

Since America has become an industrialized society, it has been suggested that the main purpose of urban schools has been to serve managerial functions. That is to say, the major function of the school has been to prepare youngsters to serve productive roles in society. Since one of the major criteria for productivity is the degree to which one is able to procure and maintain employment, the major function of the school, so the argument goes, has been to prepare youngsters for jobs.

For minority youngsters in urban areas, one is forced to question the validity of this position when we observe that most of these youngsters served by the schools are not prepared to function productively in society. When we realize that the percentage of "minority group" youngsters composing the unemployment roles far out number their part in the total population, and that fewer than half of the youngsters in inner city communities entering high school actually graduate, we are forced to conclude that for urban youngsters, the belief that the main purpose of educatfon is

to prepare children for life is a myth.

Because unemployment and dropout rates among urban youngsters have become alarmingly high, schools have raised a number of questions; however, few, if any, of these questions have been concerned with whether or not inner city schools should continue to operate on the assumption that managerial functions should be given top priority.

I suggest that the schools serving the inner city must recognize and respect the traditional values of their students and give traditional functions top priority.[7] That is to say, the school must serve the collective memory of the community with which it is working. It must preserve in the conciousness of the individuals a link with the past, the present, and the future. It must assume as its major function the development of self-esteem in youngsters through self-identity. Research results have shown that it is only after a person begins to value his connection with a group, a tie which he cannot sever under any circumstances, only after he realizes that he is important as a member of the group into which he was born, that he begins to value himself or that he develops self-esteem, and it is an established fact that self-esteem is the major success factor in any situation.[8]

The school, through teachers, must support and encourage cultural values, for it is only after these traditional functions have been served adequately that one can expect to serve managerial functions effectively.

MYTH: FOR BLACK CHILDREN, DISCIPLINE IS NECESSARY BECAUSE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT WILL BE LIMITED

Historically, disenfranchised groups in America, especially Black people, have been informed, directly and indirectly, that success for them will come if they are obedient, humble, respectful, and well-behaved.

Such assumptions so permeate our society and the institutions responsible for preparing teachers, that many teachers in the inner city function thereon without realizing the basis of their behavior. However, they do in fact operate at all levels of the educational system.

In Washington, D.C., for example, almost every Black male in high school must participate in a "cadet corps" whose first objective is to inculcate habits of orderliness and precision, to instill discipline and thereby respect for constituted authority. Marilyn Gittell and Alan Hevesi note:

> It is no accident that in high schools (in Washington) with large white enrollments, the voluntary nature of the cadet program is explained to students and (only) one-quarter or fewer of the students join--while five of the predominantly Black high schools have 100 percent enrollments.[9]

In most instances in inner city schools the prevailing emphasis is on conformity rather than creativity, on discipline rather than on independence, and on quiet orderliness rather than on the joy of discovery. I suggest that teachers in the inner city must determine whether they reward youngsters who conform, are obedient and respectful, or those who perform. The behavior a teacher rewards is the behavior expected.

One need only observe a classroom situation for a period of time to realize that the vast majority of those youngsters who are disobedient, disrespectful non-conformists in terms of the rules established in the classroom (rules which restrict the normal behavior of children having the imagination to be disruptive enough to be annoying but not enough to be excluded from the classroom) are the ones who usually have the creativity to perform. Because, however, we reward conformity and good behavior, these youngsters are labelled as problems. When we label them as such, we respond

to them as though they were problems, expect them to be problems; consequently, what we expect, we find.

Instead I suggest that teachers should expect achievement from their youngsters; look for ability, responsibility, initiative, and creativity, and reward it. Teachers in urban classrooms must treat their pupils with as much dignity and respect as other humans. John Holt points out that respect means treating children as if their ideas made some difference. He concludes:

> ...when we treat people this way, whatever their age, color or background, we find that communication barriers disappear and that learning takes place.[10]

Mrs. Zodie Johnson is a school teacher. She is responsible for the operation of the Marxhausen Primary School, a simple one-story brick building on the east side of Detroit, Michigan that's home for 300 children, 9 and one-half teachers and 10 paid professional and other aides. In one year after Mrs. Johnson assumed responsibility for Marxhausen, reading skills of first graders went from 85% below average to 90% above average, with comparably dramatic improvements among all other youngsters from the kindergarten through the third grade![11] These amazing results have been achieved because Mrs. Johnson and her staff expect children to achieve and the climate of the school informs children of this fact. Discipline is not a problem because youngsters are being challenged academically, their cultural strengths are the basis upon which their academic programs rests and they are being rewarded for initiative and creativity.

When educators expect youngsters to achieve, they generally find that youngsters will live up to their expectations. In most instances, the achievements of inner city children is directly proportionate to the staff's

understanding of the life style of the children, ability to construct educational experiences around that life style and expectation that the children can and will achieve.

MYTH: EDCUATORS IN THE INNER CITY ARE MASTERS RATHER THAN SERVANTS

For educators in urban areas, role clarification is critical to the achievement of a measure of success. Teachers in the inner city must understand and accept the fact that they are servants of the community. They are working with that community's most valuable commodity, its children; therefore, community people have a right to question the teacher's performance and activities and the teacher has an obligation to respond.

Ironically, but significantly, many inner city teachers object, verbally and behaviorally, to being defined as servants of the inner city community. However, other teachers do not object to such categorization in white middle-class communities. The reasoning is apparently based on the assumption that citizens of middle-class communities are "educated" whereas the inner city population is "uneducated." The designation "educated" or "uneducated" is usually based on the numbers of years spent in formal educational institutions. When this attitude develops among teachers, they confuse their role and begin to dictate and try to control the lives of the people in the community through the ideas they espouse and what they teach.

What really happens in this situation is that teachers become professional colonialists functioning under the guise of educators. The colonialism imposed by educators adds to that already imposed by society. Preston Wilcox explains that:

> The caste system favoring professionals in the ghetto has so effectively intervened that the key decisions are often made by professionals rather than the families they have come to serve.[12]

In defining the teacher's role in the community as one in which he/she is a servant to that community, I intend to imply that teachers must realize the perogatives the community has and accept its right to exercise them. They must realize that the community in which they work must be allowed and encouraged to participate in the establishment of policy for the school. The community should agree to the thrust of the total educational program before various aspects of it are initiated in the schools. It must participate in establishing the criteria for the hiring and firing of school personnel. The community must be accepted as the legitimate evaluator of the teacher's performance.

It should be stressed that a parent does not have to complete sixteen or more years of formal education to determine whether or not the school is performing adequately. He merely has to observe his child's educational progress to make such a decision. Parents can discuss the day's events with their children and readily know that the teacher has or has not done an effective job.

The important distinction to be made in this situation is that parent's in evaluative roles, are concerned with products whereas teachers or professional educators, functioning in such roles, are concerned with process. In reference to this situation, Joanna Samuels notes:

> When the evaluation of the teacher is determined by student achievement, teachers are left relatively free to use methods of their own choice which <u>work</u>, that is, which produce the desired outcomes. When the evaluation of the teacher is based upon process criteria, that is how subject matter is presented and how closely the teacher follows approved teaching methods, the teacher must focus on <u>means</u> rather than on the goal of student achievement and cannot realistically be held responsible

for learning outcomes.[13]

In putting the teachers' servant role into effect, I am suggesting that teachers must be held responsible for student achievement and that the role of the community in evaluation can be legitimately based on desired learning outcomes.

In suggesting a role in evaluation for parents, I am not attempting to limit the teachers' range of involvement in decision making. In fact, I am attempting to increase such. For, as H. A. Simon indicates, when methods are specified and outside evaluation focuses on methods rather than outcomes, teachers have little opportunity to exercise discretion.[14] On the other hand, when methods are left to the discretion of teachers and results are reviewed and evaluated, more opportunity for autonomous decisions is available.[15]

Parents in the inner city are not interested in how professionals serving them accomplish their tasks; they merely want their children educated. If a teacher does not facilitate this process, if he does not do the job the community he serves wants done, then he has no business functioning in that community at all. Teachers must accept the fact that they are serving at the pleasure of a given community and not at the community's expense--presently the case in many inner city situations.

MYTH: FOR EDUCATORS IN THE INNER CITY, PROMOTION IS AN INDICATION OF SUCCESS

The loyalties of teachers must be to the students and parents for whom they work and the profession in which they work, but not to the system or to their personal careers. Far too often in urban educational situations, the teachers' orientation tends to be upward to administrative superiors rather than across to the local community clients. Teachers must make decisions which are educationally sound for the youngsters with whom they work irrespective of whether or not such decisions coincide with the demands of the system.

One of my responsiblities over the last few years has been to work with teachers who are already employed in the inner city. One of the most interesting phenomenon I have experienced in these situations is the extensive complaining these individuals have done or do about situations existing in their school settings which handicap their endeavors. Inevitably, someone in the group will allude to one of four major problems:

1. The biases of standardized achievement tests
2. The irrelevancy of textbooks
3. The incompetence of school administrators
4. The illogicality of present systems developed to evaluate the process of teaching.

When these problems, as well as others, are identified, I remind the group that success in their endeavors will only come when they assume definite positions in terms of each one of these problems and when they are willing to push for the necessary changes in light of their stands.

If teachers in the inner city feel that standardized achievement tests are ineffective in evaluating the progress, strengths, and weaknesses of their students, they must decide that those tests must be discontinued and they must refuse to administer them. They must, however, be able to suggest other ways of accomplishing what the tests attempt but fail to do.

If teachers feel that the textbooks provided for their classes are oriented to a style of life completely foreign to that experienced by their students, then they must assume the position that such textbooks can no longer be used in their classrooms. They must illustrate the irrelevance of such materials and work for the development and utilization of materials which capitalize on the cultural strengths of their youngsters consequently increasing the possibilities of success.

If teachers feel that the function of an administrator is to facilitate their professional growth and to provide an educational atmosphere in which

they can be productive, but as is too often the case, prescribed activities restrict their behavior, they must join forces with the community to see to it that such administrators are relieved of their responsibilities at the earliest possible date and search for other administrative organizational patterns to accomplish their purposes.

If teachers feel that the evaluation of educational processes in the various classrooms should be the responsibility of their teaching colleagues rather than that of an administrator who seldom, if ever, is in a position to observe that process in action, then they must be willing to take affirmative action in light of such beliefs by suggesting alternatives facilitating the restructuring of present teacher evaluation procedures.

All of this is a way of saying that teachers must become professionally oriented rather than career oriented. For they can only be successful in their endeavors in the inner city when it is clearly understood by parents and students that teachers are committed to providing the best educational opportunities possible for the youngsters.

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